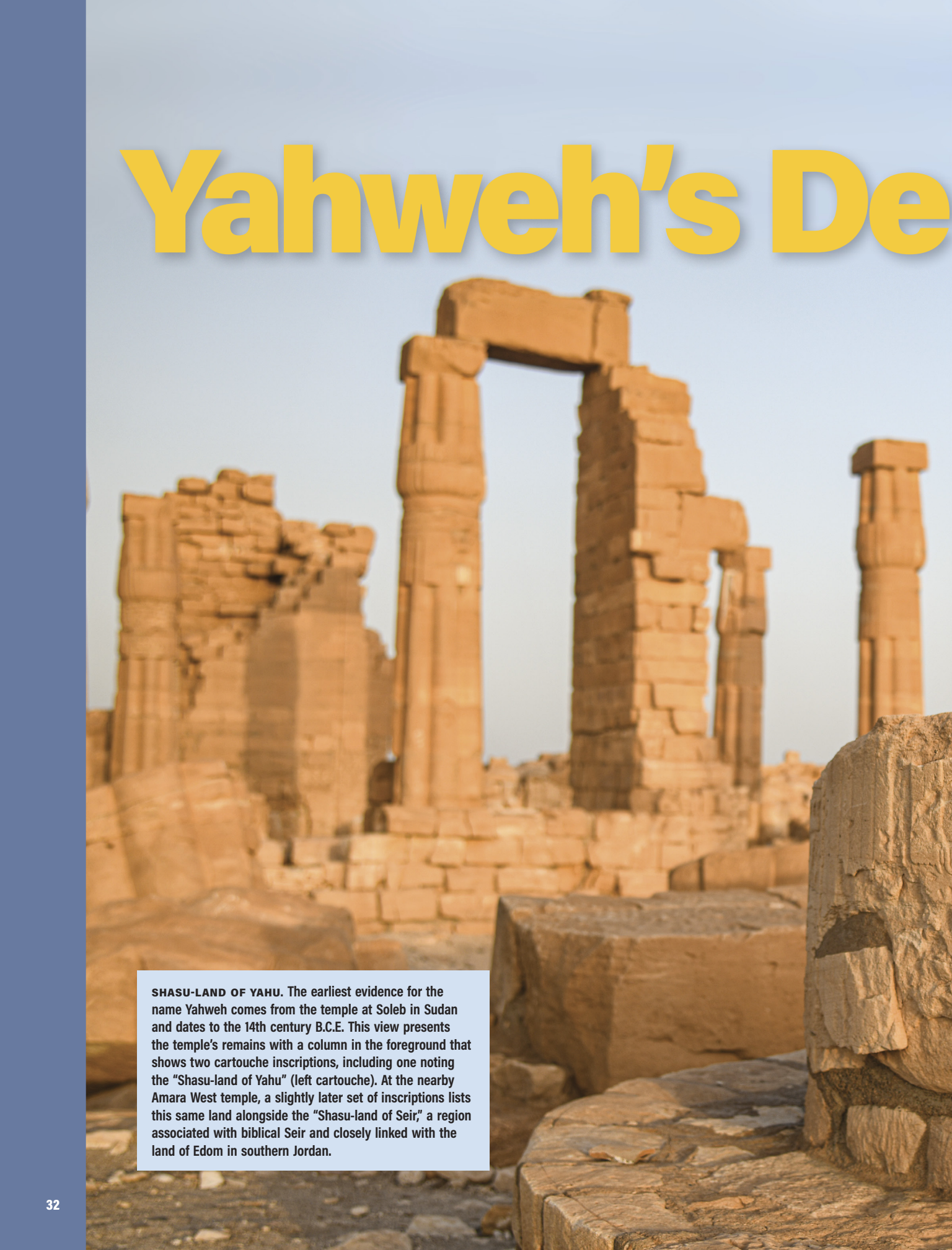


Yahweh's De



SHASU-LAND OF YAHU. The earliest evidence for the name Yahweh comes from the temple at Soleb in Sudan and dates to the 14th century B.C.E. This view presents the temple's remains with a column in the foreground that shows two cartouche inscriptions, including one noting the "Shasu-land of Yahu" (left cartouche). At the nearby Amara West temple, a slightly later set of inscriptions lists this same land alongside the "Shasu-land of Seir," a region associated with biblical Seir and closely linked with the land of Edom in southern Jordan.

Desert Origins

JUAN MANUEL TEBES

WE ALL KNOW THAT YAHWEH WAS, first and foremost, ancient Israel's God. Yet, even after hundreds of years of archaeology and biblical scholarship, we know very little about his origins—and how he came to be worshiped by the peoples of Israel and Judah. Scholars have searched for the name Yahweh in ancient West Semitic texts, especially those found at Ebla, Mari, and Ugarit, but no evidence of pre-Israelite Yahweh worship among the peoples of the ancient Levant has surfaced.

If Yahweh wasn't originally a Levantine deity, where did he come from, and when exactly did he become the national God of Israel?

Many scholars, including myself, have used the available biblical and archaeological

evidence to argue that Yahweh originated in the desert lands south of ancient Judah. Although most look to details from the story of Moses in Midian (Exodus 2–4) to argue that Yahweh became Israel's God during the time of the Exodus (the so-called Midianite Hypothesis), I believe that the Israelites only encountered this desert deity centuries later, during the tenth century B.C.E., when the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were in frequent contact with the pastoral-nomadic peoples of the southern deserts.

Before discussing the archaeological evidence for Yahweh's emergence, let us first review the Midianite Hypothesis and biblical texts related to Yahweh's southern origins.



The Midianite Hypothesis (also sometimes called the Kenite Hypothesis) argues that Yahweh came originally from the arid lands located to the south and southeast of Canaan and in northwestern Arabia. The hypothesis was first proposed by 19th-century European scholars perplexed by the connection that some biblical texts establish between Moses and the Midianites.¹ It was to the land of Midian, in northwestern Arabia, where Moses fled from Egypt and where he stayed and married a daughter



of Jethro, “the priest of Midian.” There, he also met for the first time Yahweh at Mt. Horeb, the “mountain of God” (Exodus 3), while Jethro later recognized that Yahweh “is greater than all the gods” and offered sacrifices in his honor (Exodus 18:1–12). Other biblical texts identify Moses’s father-in-law as Reuel (Exodus 2:18; Numbers 10:29) or Hobab (Judges 1:16; 4:11, 17). The latter is associated with the Kenites,

a clan of nomadic blacksmiths who also come from the southern desert regions. Some scholars have therefore attributed a significant role to the Kenites (and metallurgy) in carrying the worship of Yahweh to Canaan and early Israel.

More recent biblical scholarship, however, tends to distrust the biblical traditions that connect Moses to Midian or the Kenites. For one, none of these texts explicitly state that the Midianites worshiped Yahweh before the Israelites. These stories, as many now argue, were likely redacted in exilic or post-exilic times

DESERT LANDSCAPE. The Timna Valley, located in the Wadi Arava, was a major source of copper throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages. The pharaohs of New Kingdom Egypt launched extensive mining and smelting operations at Timna (13th–12th centuries B.C.E.) that engaged members of the local nomadic tribes as miners, smiths, and laborers. Since the 1960s, archaeologists have unearthed evidence of Timna’s smelting camps and metallurgical workshops (one shown below, the fenced area to the left), as well as several open-air shrines (fenced area to the right) used by the mine’s itinerant workers.



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PHOTO BY JUAN MANUEL TERRES



(i.e., after the sixth century B.C.E.), and although it is undeniable that they are rooted in ancient traditions, their historicity is open to debate. In addition, there is little archaeological evidence that can connect the early Israelites to the land of Midian.

Still, even outside the story of Moses and Midian, there are a number of biblical texts that solidly point to the south as Yahweh's homeland. The key text is the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), a victory hymn widely considered to be one of the earliest pieces of Hebrew literature.* Yahweh is depicted as a warrior deity who approaches from the south amid earthquakes and storms: "Yahweh, when you set out from Seir, as you trod the land of Edom." Later, in verse 5, Yahweh is also called "the one of Sinai." The biblical writers locate Edom in what is today southern Jordan, while Seir was also a southern region, probably situated in the Negev.

Another early poetic text, the Blessing of Moses (Deuteronomy 33:2), uses similar imagery

* Lawrence E. Stager, "The Song of Deborah—Why Some Tribes Answered the Call and Others Did Not," *BAR*, January/February 1989.

DESERT SHRINE. The most important of Timna's desert shrines was built in the early 13th century B.C.E. and dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Hathor. Despite its formal associations with the foreign goddess, the shrine was built open to the air and against a cliff face, in the tradition of religious architecture common to the desert peoples of the south. Worshipers left votive gifts within the sanctuary, where fire and metallurgical rituals were carried out. When Egypt abandoned Timna in the mid-12th century B.C.E., local desert peoples continued to use the shrine and recycled older cultic elements, such as the standing stones.

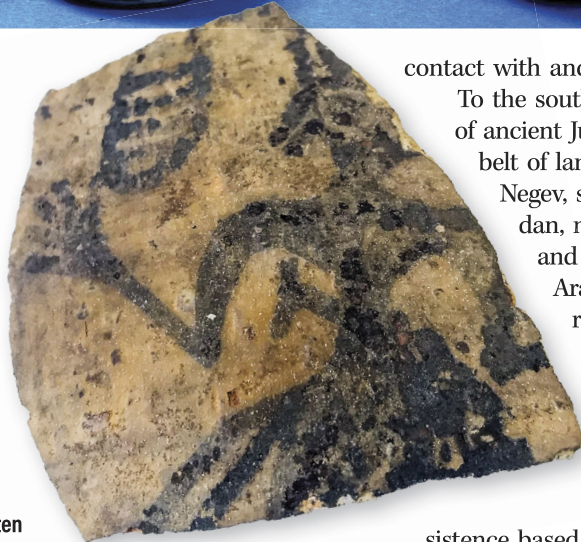
to connect Israel's God to the south: "Yahweh came from Sinai, for them, after Seir, he rose on the horizon, after Mt. Paran he shone forth." Even though scholars disagree on the exact location of both Mt. Sinai and Mt. Paran, it is clear that both were in the south (see "Mt. Sinai: The Mountain of Yahweh," p. 37).

Later biblical texts, such as Habakkuk 3 and Psalm 68, both likely written during the seventh–sixth centuries B.C.E. or later, continue to view the south as Yahweh's homeland. These texts reference many of the same southern locales mentioned in the earlier poetry, such as Sinai and Mt. Paran, but also include Teman, probably



TOP: ZEVI RADOMAN / BIBELANDPICTURES.COM
INSET: PHOTO BY JUAN MANUEL TERES WITH PERMISSION FROM THE DEUTSCHES BERGHAU-MUSEUM

QURAYYAH POTTERY. Distinctive painted pottery, likely coming from the site of Qurayyah in northwest Arabia, is often found in Late Bronze and early Iron Age sites in the desert regions south of Judah. As evidenced by vessels found at Timna (above), the pottery features colorful figural and geometric designs, including ostriches (front center vessel) that would have been hunted by local tribes. Some pieces, like the sherd at right from the site of Barqa el-Hetiye near the ancient copper mines of Faynan in southern Jordan, also show human figures, often depicted with arms extended, long hair or a headdress, skirts, and armed with a dagger or sword.



contact with ancient Israel?

To the south and southeast of ancient Judah lies an arid belt of land comprising the Negev, southern Transjordan, northeastern Sinai, and northwestern Arabia. Most of these regions receive little precipitation. Since prehistoric times, the local populations have developed a mode of sub-

a general designation for “the south.”

So is there any historical reality behind the tradition of Yahweh’s southern homeland? Do we have any evidence beyond the Bible? Surprisingly, the answer is yes. A trove of archaeological and epigraphic evidence tells us a lot about the social setting where Yahweh emerged and how this deity came to be adopted by the ancient Israelites.

Rather than looking for evidence of a specific biblical episode, such as Moses’s connection to Midian, we will center our attention on the history and archaeology of the southern desert regions. What does this evidence reveal about the cultic practices and religious beliefs of the people who lived in the southern deserts, and when might these people have been in direct

sistence based on nomadic pastoralism and simple, opportunistic farming.

This way of life had, of course, a huge influence on their religious practices, as evident by the distinct types of cultic architecture and features that archaeologists find across these desert regions.

Open-air courtyard shrines were the most common type of religious architecture, consisting of sacred spaces of varied shape and dimension. These shrines had few, if any, roofed spaces and presented a limited repertoire of cultic furniture. Where the landscape allowed, the shrines were often cut into cliff faces, making use of natural cavities in the rock or enclosing rocky overhangs with stone architecture.

Rock art, too, often provides a glimpse into their cultic beliefs. The southern deserts are dotted with a wide array of rock carvings from different periods, and many of these drawings reflect cultic imagery, including worshipers, rituals, and ritually symbolic animals.

Ancient desert peoples also spent considerable time and resources building large funerary structures, typically mounded piles of stone that archaeologists call cairns or tumuli. The sites, often located at prominent locations in the landscape, were frequently visited, rebuilt, and reused over the millennia, suggesting that death

and the afterlife were important elements of the desert belief system.

Unworked standing stones were, by far, the most important component of the desert cultic sites.* They are normally found within open-air shrines or arranged in rows at small cultic sites.

* Uzi Avner, "Sacred Stones in the Desert," *BAR*, May/June 2001.

Mt. Sinai: The Mountain of Yahweh

JUAN MANUEL TEBES

The exact location of Mt. Sinai—also called Mt. Horeb in the biblical text—has eluded scholars for centuries. Following Christian traditions dating as early as the fourth century C.E., most consider the mountainous region of southern Sinai as the most likely setting of Yahweh's theophany (visible manifestation of a deity), with two neighboring mountains attracting most of the attention: Jebel Serbal and Jebel Musa. St. Catherine's Monastery rests at the foot of the latter.

Other, more easterly locations have also been proposed, including the Kadesh Barnea area in northeastern Sinai, Har Karkom in the southwestern Negev, and the Petra region in southern Jordan. In addition, a long tradition in scholarship, originating with Jewish-Hellenistic and early Christian authors but popularized by modern Western scholars traveling to northwestern Arabia, has suggested that Mt. Sinai was located in Midian. According to these claims, Mt. Sinai should be located

in the Jebel al-Lawz mountain range east of the Gulf of Aqaba or the Hallat al-Badr, west of Tayma, both in northwest Saudi Arabia.

Wherever one locates Mt. Sinai, however, it is clear that the biblical writers understood Yahweh to be a "mountain god," similar to the Canaanite gods known from the Ugaritic texts. At Ugarit, along Syria's northern coast, the gods are depicted as having their own residences, often atop mountain peaks, from where they moved freely to do their businesses. Most famous was Baal, who built his palace at Sapan, biblical Mt. Zaphon. It is likely that the biblical authors adapted the Canaanite tradition of the march of the divine warrior Baal, in the midst of storms from his palace, to depict Yahweh's march from his southern sanctuary (Judges 5). 📖

MOUNTAIN ABODE. St. Catherine's Monastery rests at the base of the traditional Mt. Sinai (Jebel Musa) in Egypt.





TIMNA ROCK ART. This engraving from a large rock panel close to the Timna Hathor shrine depicts scenes of ritual hunting. The entire panel shows armed men, some standing and others being pulled in chariots, chasing desert animals such as ibexes, ostriches, and oryx antelopes. The scenes indicate the important role played by tribal leaders—either warrior chiefs or shaman-like priests—in mediating human relationships with local deities, including possibly the desert God Yahweh.

Such stones may have served as aniconic representations of deities, but they may also have been set up to remember a special individual or event or to mark boundaries and tombs.

Archaeological and historical evidence indicates that the early worship of Yahweh included many of these same features. This leads us to the rather remarkable conclusion that Yahweh was, indeed, a desert deity who originated in the desert lands south of Israel. But when and how did this happen?

The earliest epigraphic evidence of the name Yahweh appears in two inscriptions from a pair of New Kingdom Egyptian temples in Nubia, present-day Sudan. The first one is inscribed on a column from the Temple of Soleb (see pp. 32–33), dating to the reign of Pharaoh Amenhotep III (c. 1390–1353 B.C.E.), while the second appears on a wall in the Amara West

temple and dates to the time of Ramesses II (c. 1279–1213 B.C.E.). These inscriptions present topographical lists depicting several lands of the “Shasu,” the Egyptian name for the pastoral-nomadic populations that lived east of the Sinai. Among these is listed the “Shasu-land of Yahu (*yhw*),” which most scholars believe to be the earliest attestation of the name Yahweh.

These inscriptions indicate that, by the 14th century, the name Yahu was associated with regions south of Canaan. A southern locale for Yahu is clearly suggested by a reference in the same list to the “Shasu-land of Seir.” As we have seen, Seir is a name known in the Bible as a southern region close to Edom. Other New Kingdom Egyptian inscriptions point in the same direction, as they refer to Shasu tribes from Edom and Seir. Yet we cannot be sure exactly how this Yahu was understood. Was it the name of a place, tribe, or god? Did the name perhaps have multiple, overlapping associations? The texts do not tell us.

Fortunately, archaeology provides some additional information about where (and when) Yahweh may have emerged. During the New Kingdom, the Negev was part of the southern periphery of Egypt’s empire in Canaan. The Egyptian pharaohs routinely exploited the

copper mines at Timna in the southern Arava, work that was carried out with the help of miners and smiths from the surrounding desert regions, including Edom and northwest Arabia.

Archaeologists have excavated several cultic places in and around Timna, including courtyard and rock-cut shrines. The most important was a small sanctuary, ostensibly dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Hathor and built in the 13th–12th centuries B.C.E. in the location of an earlier local shrine. The Timna shrine consisted of a shallow niche cut into the face of the cliff; in front stood an open-air portico and an outer court with standing stones. Here, rituals were carried out, some of them involving the use of metallurgy and fire.

While the local miners who used the shrine did not leave any inscriptions, something of their thoughts and beliefs can be glimpsed from the iconography found on their pottery and drawings carved near the shrine. The most impressive imagery appears on painted vessels, thought to originate from the site of Qurayyah, which is located about 90 miles south of Timna in northwest Saudi Arabia, the heartland of ancient Midian. This distinctive pottery often features human figures with long hair or special headgear and arms extended in gestures of “adoration” (perhaps worshippers or priests), as well as depictions of men armed with swords or daggers, possibly hunters or tribal chiefs. The pottery also includes depictions of ostriches, desert birds that were frequently hunted in antiquity and thus may have symbolized man’s power over animals and nature. Similar figures and scenes are found in nearby rock art, which shows armed men participating in sacred hunts, a ritual known mostly

from pre-Islamic South Arabia.

Taken together, this iconographic evidence expresses the importance that local desert peoples attached to hunting, war, and tribal leadership. These images give us an idea of the tribal world in which Yahweh emerged, where worshippers encountered the divine through intricate rituals mediated by tribal warriors or priests who were attached to desert deities.

Although more recent proponents of the

Midianite Hypothesis have used such archaeological evidence—especially the appearance and distribution of the Qurayyah painted pottery—to argue that Yahweh emerged as Israel’s God during or shortly after the presumed time of Moses and the Exodus (i.e., 13th and 12th centuries B.C.E.), there is, in fact, nothing to indicate such a scenario. During the early Iron Age, when the tribes of Israel supposedly first adopted Yahweh as their God from the southern desert peoples, there is little evidence of contact between the central hill country, where most scholars agree ancient Israel first appeared, and the arid regions to the south. Qurayyah painted pottery is found almost exclusively at sites in the Negev and southern Transjordan, while virtually none has been found in the central hill country. Similarly, while copper and bronze artifacts from the Arava mines are found at northern sites, the finds are concentrated in the Jezreel and Jordan Valleys, not in the rural hill country settlements. This suggests that during the Iron



DESERT DWELLER. This 12th-century B.C.E. depiction of a Shasu prisoner on a floor tile comes from the palace of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu in Egypt. “Shasu” was the Egyptian name for the nomadic pastoralists who lived east of the Sinai. Here, the prisoner is bearded and wearing a distinctive headdress and colorful robe and tunic.

Age I (c. 1200–1000 B.C.E.), it was the remnants of the urban Canaanites who had contacts with the southern miners and smiths, not the early Israelites.

I argue that it was only centuries later, during the tenth century B.C.E., that we have the first evidence for sustained contact between the peoples of the desert in the south and the Israelites of the north. During the tenth century, long after the collapse of the Egyptian empire, the new royal houses of Israel and Judah established towns and settlements along their southern frontier, especially in the Beer-sheba Valley of the northern Negev. These settlements encouraged the two-way flow of religious ideas and practices between the northern newcomers and the pastoral-nomadic peoples of the south. It was at this moment, not before, that ancient Israel began to worship its new national God, Yahweh.

The Israelites' rapid adoption of this southern desert deity may seem surprising, but it

should be remembered that Yahweh was, first and foremost, the patron deity of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The Hebrew Bible preserves evidence of ancient Israel's early worship of Canaanite deities such as El, Baal, and Asherah, and of Yahweh's competition with these gods and his rise to prominence (Deuteronomy 33:26–27; Psalm 18:7–19). During the tenth century, Yahweh was rapidly assimilated into the Israelite pantheon, with the kings of Israel and Judah eager to rally support behind the banner of this new southern God who, with time, took over many of the qualities of and even surpassed his rival Canaanite deities, particularly the aged patriarchal god El and the storm god Baal.²

Royal sponsorship was essential to Yahweh's rapid ascension, and he was gradually adopted by the rest of the population in a process that took centuries—as attested by the familiar rants of biblical prophets against foreign gods. By the ninth century, confirmation of Yahweh's role as Israel's national God comes from the Mesha Stele, in which Mesha, king of Moab, guided by his god Chemosh, claims to have defeated Israel and pillaged the ritual vessels of the Israelite God Yahweh.

Additional evidence for the worship of Yahweh among the Israelites comes from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, a lonely hilltop site in northeastern Sinai that is dated to the late ninth and early eighth centuries and variously interpreted as an Israelite fort, a caravanserai, or a cultic center. Whatever its purpose, Kuntillet 'Ajrud was visited by passing travelers who left votive offerings, often inscribed with names and blessings. Several of the site's now famous inscriptions mention

DESERT WORSHIP. At the desert site of Kuntillet 'Ajrud in northeastern Sinai, several Hebrew inscriptions have been found that mention the Israelite God Yahweh. This pithos features five standing human figures, identified by their raised arms as worshipers. An inscription (not pictured) written to the right of the scene reads, in part, "I have blessed you by Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah. May he bless you and may he keep you and may he be with my lord [forever]." Here, as in the Hebrew Bible, Teman appears to refer to the desert regions south of Judah. The inscription, therefore, provides evidence that some ancient Israelites associated Yahweh with the desert south.

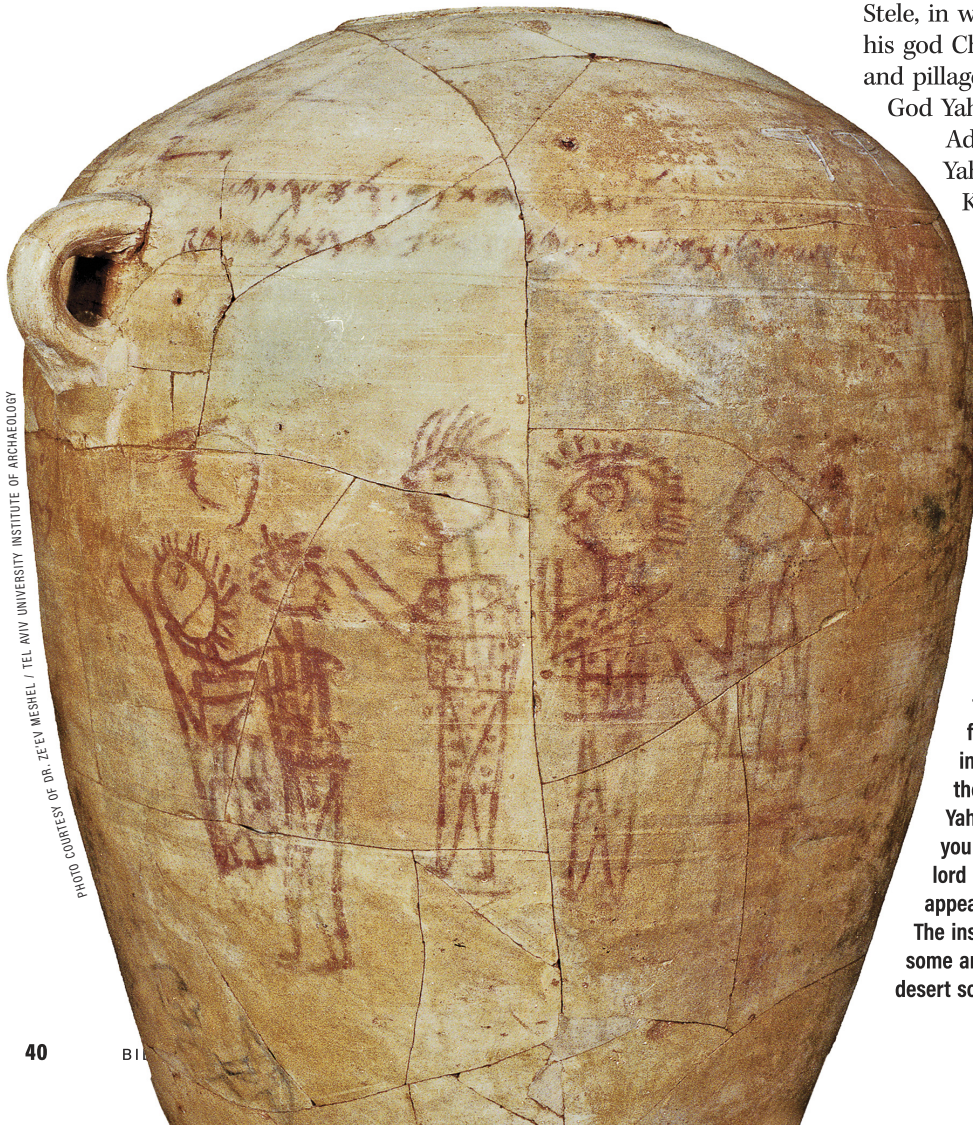


PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. ZEEV MESHUEL / TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

ARAD TEMPLE. This tiny room was the most sacred part of a small temple, first built in the eighth century B.C.E., excavated at the site of Tel Arad in the northern Negev. It once held a limestone stela with traces of red pigment, two smaller stone slabs, and two altars. Many believe the standing stones served as aniconic representations of the deity or deities worshiped at the temple, one of whom may have been Yahweh. Replicas of the stones and altars have been reconstructed at Arad (right), while the original pieces have been moved to the Israel Museum.

“Yahweh of Samaria” and “Yahweh of Teman.” In these texts, Yahweh appears as the patron deity of the Northern Kingdom (Samaria) but is also associated with Teman, which was a generic term used for the south. As such, Yahweh of Teman is best understood as the southern manifestation of Israel’s God, “Yahweh of the Southland.”

Kuntillet ‘Ajrud’s location at the crossroads between the southern Levant, northern Arabia, and Egypt left it open to a mixture of diverse cultural and religious elements. For example, a drawing from a storage jar found at the site depicts two standing figures with features derived from Egyptian and Levantine iconography, but mixed with bovine imagery. Another drawing depicts five figures standing in a line with their arms raised, probably Yahwistic worshipers in procession. Notably, their pose and features resemble those of the “adorant” figures attested in the Qurayyah painted pottery and the rock art found at Timna.

Kuntillet ‘Ajrud was not the only site in the desert south that was visited for sacred worship. Recovered pottery shows that dozens of ancient cairns in the central Negev and northeastern Sinai were routinely visited during the Iron Age. Such funerary sites and monuments continued to be the focus of ritual travel and commemoration that were eventually incorporated into Israelite cultic practice.

A final piece of evidence for the influence of desert religious practices in the cult of ancient Israel comes from the small shrine discovered at Tel Arad in the northern Negev. The shrine, which was established in the mid-eighth century, possibly as a shrine to Yahweh, features one or more standing stones within the innermost room (“holy of holies”). These stones, following in the long tradition of standing stones erected at southern cultic sites, likely functioned as aniconic representations of Yahweh and perhaps other gods who were worshiped at the site.

Admittedly, there is still much we do not know about Yahweh’s origins. But the available



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biblical and archaeological evidence clearly indicates that Yahweh originated in the desert lands south of Judah, where pastoral-nomadic peoples across the millennia shared a common set of religious ideas and architecture. Once Yahweh was adopted as Israel’s God in the tenth century B.C.E., many important aspects of this long-lived desert cult—including worship of a war and hunting god, aniconism, sacred travel and commemoration, and metallurgy—became hallmarks of Israelite worship and religion. ☞

¹ Theodore J. Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God: Ancient Israelite Religion Through the Lens of Divinity* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2020), pp. 271–282. For a recent volume with different approaches to the Midianite Hypothesis, see Juan M. Tebes and Christian Frevel, eds., *The Desert Origins of God: Yahweh’s Emergence and Early History in the Southern Levant and Northern Arabia*, *Entangled Religions* 12.2 (Bochum: Ruhr-Universität Bochum, 2021).

² See Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

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